

Doctrine of Discovery: Modern Legacy

Since the earliest European contact, Native peoples and their cultures have been dominated and decimated. The worldview of conquest and cultural superiority reflected in the 15th Century Doctrine of Discovery has continued in different forms. In the 19th Century, it showed up as Manifest Destiny, the general conviction that American settlers had a divine right and destiny to expand throughout the land. In the 20th Century, it showed up as the Boarding School Era, where Native children were forcibly taken from their families and raised in schools where they were forbidden to speak their Native languages and taught that their culture and religion were bad. In the land that prides itself in religious freedom, it was not until 1978 that Native Americans could legally practice their own religion. Even in the 21st Century, relatively small issues such as sports teams' Indian mascots—which many find offensive—spurs passion and conflict.



This long and painful history has had a tremendous impact on the health and wellbeing of Minnesota's Native peoples. Data clearly shows that Minnesota's Native communities are under great stress.

A Community in Distress

If the community at large had the same struggles as Native American communities, it would be viewed as a national crisis. While Native American communities have many assets and strengths to build on, a look at the data is alarming.

- **Median Household Income:** Median income for Minnesota Native Americans was \$34,863 compared to \$65,864 for white Minnesotans. (2016).ⁱ
- **Poverty :** 31 percent of Minnesota's Native Americans—nearly one out of three—lived in poverty in 2016 compared to 8 percent for white Minnesotans.ⁱⁱ
- **Education:** The on-time graduation rate for Native American students in 2016 was 53 percent compared to 87 percent for white Minnesotans.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Infant Mortality:** Native American babies die at more than twice the rate of white babies in Minnesota (2009-2013).^{iv}
- **Teen Suicide:** "[A]mong young adults ages 18 to 24, Native American have higher rates of suicide than any other ethnicity, and higher than the general population. American Indian teens in the Upper Midwest are 10 times more likely than other teenagers to commit suicide (Huffington Post, 2015).^v

The list goes on. Data shows that Native Americans are more likely to be unemployed or incarcerated and less likely to own their own homes. Minnesota's Native American children are much more likely to end up in out-of-home placements.^{vi}

Some say that Native Americans "have made poor choices" or "they just need to get over it." We see this data as reflecting the legacy of trauma done *to* indigenous communities, institutional efforts to break Indian identity, family structure, culture, and spirit.

Historic Trauma

Some people understand Native communities' poor health and well being in terms of "historic trauma." This refers to the cumulative effect of trauma—how harms done in the past get passed from generation to generation and become a vicious cycle. For Native American communities, that historic trauma has included the consistent loss of the basic foundations of community: land, language and culture. Not only is their history not understood, but they are blamed for the struggles they face. Some are resilient and able to overcome it. For many, it creates a sense of hopelessness and despair.

Current research gives some insight into how trauma can be intergenerational.^{vii} Researchers have looked at "Adverse Childhood Experiences" and their impact on future well being. They start by asking people how many of nine negative experiences they had as children, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, divorce/separation, domestic abuse towards a parent, an incarcerated parent or problem drinking or drug use in the home. Then they ask about people's current lives and health problems. What they found is that adverse experiences for children increases the likelihood they will have health problems as adults, such as anxiety, depression, smoking, and alcohol or substance abuse.

This is one explanation for how trauma becomes self perpetuating: Kids who grow up in trauma are more likely to repeat that trauma in the families they create as adults. And for Native Americans, this trauma is not limited to individual families, but affects many in their community. The Minnesota Department of Health explains how adverse experiences affect child brain development:

[A]cute or prolonged stress can become toxic to the developing brain and body. ... In childhood, persistent and intense stress stemming from [Adverse Childhood Experiences] actually influences how the brain develops. Toxic stress strengthens connections in the parts of the brain that are associated with fear, arousal, and emotional regulation. Additionally, toxic stress negatively impacts parts of the brain associated with learning and memory.

Questions

- What is your initial reaction to reading the data on Native American community well being?
- Can you think of friends or family where you can see how trauma might be getting passed from one generation to the next?
- If the current conditions in Native American communities are the result of past efforts by religious and civic leaders to break Indian identity, culture, and spirit, what is the proper response by people of faith moving forward?

ⁱ American Fact Finder: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/income-poverty/>

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ⁱⁱⁱ Wilder Foundation, [COMPASS website](#), accessed June 19, 2014

^{iv} Minnesota Dept. of Health, https://apps.health.state.mn.us/mndata/rep_mortality#byrace

^v Huffington Post: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/native-american-youth-suicide-rates-are-at-crisis-levels_us_560c3084e4b0768127005591

^{vi} Minnesota Dept. of Children and Family Services, [Minnesota Child Welfare Disparities Report](#), February 2010.

^{vii} Minnesota Dept. of Health [Adverse Childhood Experiences webpage](#).